

Testimony for HB 5326

Public Health Committee

Monday, March 17, 2014

Chairwomen Senator Gerratana and Representative Johnson and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity today to testify in support of House Bill 5326.

In 1965, decades after losing his wife to cancer, my grandfather was 71 and could no longer cope with his own illness. He walked into the garden and shot himself. It's a horrible legacy to live with, imagining the physical horror that my uncle faced finding his body, and the mental anguish that my grandfather must have suffered preparing for this violent and undignified death.

In the past two years, there has been much reporting of gun death statistics, but in all this reporting, I've never heard statistics concerning the number of people who kill themselves when faced with terminal illness. Perhaps there are others here today who will testify to this, and you will understand that by passing this bill you will eliminate these violent and horrible instances.

In each decade to follow, 4 of his 5 children died of terminal disease, my childhood favorite Uncle Deitrich died of lymphoma, my Aunt Sally had leukemia, my Uncle Jim had Parkinson's and my own father's lung cancer metastasized to his brain and bones. My father may have had the best death of all, at home surrounded by his children, but it was also extremely painful, beyond what liquid morphine can alleviate.

My husband has also lost family members to terminal illness. Cancer took both of his parents and an Aunt, and his step-mother recently died of Alzheimer's. Her death was extremely difficult with a lengthy nursing home stay, one in which her doctor ignored the wishes stated in her living will. She had clearly written out in her medical directive that she did not want IV fluids. Unable to walk, attend to any ADLs or formulate coherent sentences, when she stopped eating and became bedridden, without ever mentioning the possibility of transitioning to medicare's hospice care, instead her physician exerted his influence and medical authority to persuade my husband it would be in her best interest to be transferred her to a hospital wing to begin IV therapy and antibiotics.

This decision extended her life several months, but her condition continued to decline, marked by bed-sores, choking on saliva & food and wasting below 80 lbs. My husband is left with the legacy that by not freely having the option to let his step-mother die, he significantly extended her suffering.

Please pass House Bill 5326 to allow patients to die without extensive suffering and to allow better written directives in living wills.

Should I ever be diagnosed with terminal illness, I don't want to have to uproot the last year of my life and be forced to move out of my home, away from friends and neighbors to establish residency in a state that has a right to die compassionately. I also never want to be left to consider the violent option that my grandfather chose.

Thank you,

Jennifer Siskind

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